

# capsule

## 3.

Sylvia Safdie seen by  
Sherry Simon

..... Léonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery



SYLVIA SAFDIE: Alphabets of Passage  
Sherry Simon

The two paintings shown here are a mix of words and images, stains and markings, colours and uneven surfaces. If we read them from the top down, as we seem invited to do, there are two different kinds of progression. In one image, words emerge out of clouds of confusion, out of the formlessness of first beginnings, and hover over a large rock covering a human figure. In the second image, the movement is reversed: the more emphatic, recognizable figures come first: floating, hanging figures that seem to descend, and perhaps return, to the condition of signs, mingling with tiny scrawled upside down words, becoming ciphers in an alphabet of uncertain origins.

When various kinds of signs are brought together on a single page, their presence together raises a question. The viewer wants to assign a relationship to them – to decide if one form speaks for the others, if there is a movement of transformation from one into another, if a stick figure for instance is turning into a human or a human returning to an inanimate state. This question can be seen as a problem of translation: what kinds of passage are possible among these different kinds of languages?

Roland Barthes liked to imagine the ideal of a book where the text would not comment on the images and the images would not illustrate the text. His model was what he called a kind of "visual wavering", analogous to the Zen moment of 'satori' – a relationship between word and image that would cause a tremor of meaning, that would disturb rather than confirm the order of knowledge. His book on Japan does not really attain this ideal, despite Barthes having announced his goal. But where Barthes himself seems to feel this "tremor of meaning" most intensely is when he shows how, in Japanese calligraphy, writing approaches the condition of painting. Impossible, he observes, to decide where writing ends and where painting begins. Cy Twombly takes this difficulty one step further – perhaps even mocking the attempt to make a distinction – with his cursive writing that looks like it might mean something but does not.

The very smallest mark wants to signify, says Barthes. And this can be seen in Safdie's figures which seem to be humans, and then – lacking the very tiniest stroke – fall back into some other order of existence. They travel to the domain of the alphabet, taking up the condition of a letter in an arcane and unknown script.

The titles *Notes or Notations* suggest forms of response that are improvised and provisional. They are gestures that follow quickly upon a thought, the pen or the brush reacting to something observed or suddenly "seen", or a reflection that surfaces in the stillness of the day. A notebook registers the impressions of a curious mind, or records the doubts of a self in construction. It is also a place where different forms of expression can be drawn into conversation, like so many ideas scrawled in a moment of discovery on a napkin. And here is where the writer's notebook meets that of the visual artist, when words and images find themselves on the same page.

This is one way of reading these images, as a progression between symbols, one seeming to lead into the other, backwards or forwards along some passage joining the animate and the inanimate. But these surfaces are also maps. The territory is covered by markings: words, figures, grains of earth, the outlines of continents. They are maps in the manner of ancient cartographers, where words, lines and images are brought together not only to show the expanse of territory but to tell the story of exploration. On these maps, the images of ships or animals or mountains were not decorations – they illustrated the voyage itself and the encounters, which had occurred. Sylvia Safdie too proposes an art of exploration, using the earth of all the continents as her matter, and setting the elemental human figure into movement. Signs in a field of light, her figures travel through a geography that is only partially known.

Orientation is enigmatic. The map has no key, and though one might at first be tempted to read from top down and see a movement of falling, it is also possible to see figures rooted or suspended, emerging or receding into the air. And then there is the area around the figures, the field out of which figures appear and into which they are absorbed. This space is a positive presence, made luminous through the applications of different-coloured earths. It too is a scene of expression, recalling the process through which Safdie applies earth to the Mylar, and then works with earth and oil. In Safdie's work, meaning includes process and medium. This makes for a collapsing of means and end, similar to a performance where gesture says all. In fact, the videos Safdie made in 2009, which demonstrate how the earth is applied, smudged, smeared, erased, respread and finally left to dry, are evidence of the movement that seems locked in these signs. Her work resonates with the rhythm of erasures and the movements of doing and undoing. The human figure is enhanced

or diminished, made to fly or fall, but then is caught in a very provisional and tense stillness. Each appearance of the figure is momentary and attached to the present tense of its making. Begun in the late 1990s, Sylvia Safdie's *Notes* are fragments from a series, which has not yet come to an end. This means that these pages are caught up in an unfinished present, opening onto a sum of possible variations and a field of infinite multiplication.

In the text written across the first image, Safdie evokes the passage of a stone from its mountain river into the force field of human listening and then back. This process of unsettling, as well as the paradox of the "invisible of the visible" invoked by Safdie, would appeal to the poet Anne Carson, whose poetry carries the consciousness of overlapping and intruding realities, and uses translation as a principle of composition. One of the ways that she evokes such paradoxes is in the idea of the negative. To understand the linguistic fact of negation, one must simultaneously see something existing and then not. "Negation requires this collusion of the present and the absent on the screen of the imagination...", writes Carson. Because of its embrace of doubleness, of what is and what is not, negation "posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement". Safdie's figures which are forever on the verge of emergence or disappearance, or on the point of becoming something else, or moving from one form of communication to another, illustrate a similar principle. Realms impinge upon one another, bringing their various languages into uneasy conversation.

#### References:

Barthes, Roland, *L'empire des signes*,  
Genève: A. Skira, 1970.  
Carson, Anne, *Economy of the Unlost*,  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.  
Safdie, Sylvia, *Figures and Grounds II*,  
video, 2009, 5 min. 31 sec.  
Safdie, Sylvia, *Figures and Grounds III*,  
video, 2009, 7 min. 3 sec.

Sherry Simon teaches in the Département d'Études françaises at Concordia University. She has published widely in the field of translation studies and Canadian culture, and is the author of *Le Trafic des langues*, *Gender in Translation*, and most recently of *Translating Montreal*. Edited and co-edited publications include *Culture in Transit*, *Translating in the Postcolonial Era* (with Paul St-Pierre) and *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal* (with Pierre Anctil and Norm Ravvin). She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a Killam Research Fellow (2009-2011).

Sylvia Safdie was born in Aley, Lebanon, in 1942, and lived her first years in Israel before moving to Canada in 1953. She obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from Concordia University in 1975, and her work has been included in several exhibitions in Canada and abroad since the end of the seventies. Her art has been the subject of numerous publications and is part of museum collections. Sylvia Safdie lives and works in Montreal.



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**Works exhibited**  
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**Notations, pg. 123, 1997**

Graphite, earth and oil on Mylar  
Collection of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art  
Gallery, Concordia University  
Purchase - Leonard & Bina Ellen Art  
Acquisition Endowment, 1998  
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**Notes from my Journal, pg. 490, 1997**

Graphite, earth and oil on Mylar  
Collection of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art  
Gallery, Concordia University  
Gift of the artist, 1998  
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oblique point of view.  
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